

# A Step Or Two In The Right Direction

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

*I*'d always wanted to learn to dance ever since I stood in the doorway of the Merriott tithe barn not long after VE Day and watched the grown-ups dancing to the music of Charlie Stoodley And His Band: piano, violin, accordion and drums. I think the music got to me. So, when in the early 1950's word had it that the Yeovil-based Reg Allen School of Dancing would be holding classes in Crewkerne on Wednesday nights starting the following week, here at last was the opportunity I'd been waiting for.

The classes were held in the Church Hall in Abbey Street. There was no live music of course, no Charlie Stoodley And His Band. Instead there was a record player perched on a chair at the end of the hall and a Victor Sylvester record or two. And there was Joyce Allen, brave soul.

Lads first. There was a little gang of us from Merriott and we were lined up in a row across the hall. Victor Sylvester was silent. *Forward, side, together.....forward, side, together..... forward, side, together.* Stiff-legged, robot-like, we made our way down the hall, turned around, and then made our way back again. *Forward, side, together..... forward, side, together.* Jake the Fake with the extra leg would have done better than most of us.

Then it was the girls' turn. It seemed to come much easier to them even though they had to do it backwards.

Then it was boys and girls together, and Victor Sylvester, too. *'You must hold each other close,'* said Joyce, *'so that you move in unison.'* And to achieve this we had to hold a handkerchief pressed between our bodies. I'm not sure if this improved my dancing or not but it did have the effect of sending my blood rushing around making all sorts of unusual detours, reaching parts of the body that even Heineken beer has difficulty in locating nowadays. Had my mother known dancing was having this effect on me I think she may well have put a stop to it.

After a few lessons, our confidence was growing. By now, we could waltz a bit but only in a forward direction, and the quickstep was coming along well. We even had stab at the samba. We were hooked. We couldn't get enough. So on Friday nights we cycled to South Petherton, down to Mrs Shutler.

Mrs Shutler held classes in what must once have been a hayloft, in a yard near the post office. You went up a flight of stone steps to get in. It was here I learnt there was another sort of dancing called Old Time, or as the posters used to say, Olde Tyme.

I never much cared for the Olde Tyme, although there was just one dance that I quite liked, the St. Bernard waltz. There's a bit in that one where you stamp your feet.

*Da de-da de-da **STAMP STAMP***

*Da de-da de-da **STAMP STAMP***

*Da de-da de-da da da.....*

and then on in to waltz time.

Yes, I liked that stamping bit and thought I'd always remember that particular dance. But many years later, at a very formal 'do', my memory let me down. Over keen, I rather embarrassingly stamped-stamped very loudly when everybody else was elegantly waltzing.

At Mrs Shutler's classes there was a girl I took a fancy to. She was very pretty and had very dark hair. But she didn't think much of me. *'When you're dancing your bum sticks out,'* she said, so I scurried back to the security of my mates.

What with Joyce Allen and Mrs Shutler knocking us into shape, we were soon ready to take on the local dancing world, which at that time meant Stoke dances.



The dances, held in the village hall at Stoke-under-Ham at the foot of Ham Hill, had by then been running for some time, perhaps from back in the war years. They had a bit of a bad reputation, what with the soldiers from Houndstone army camp causing a spot of trouble now and then. But by the early 1950's all that seemed to have passed and Stoke

dances were an essential part of the social scene for the local youngsters, with special bus services laid on to get you there and to get you home after.

Now you couldn't just go to a dance, you had to get ready first. Trousers were pressed, shoes polished. About six o'clock it was time to shave off the five o'clock shadow with the Seven O'clock razor blade. But first a check in the mirror to see if the Valderma plastered on your face at bedtime every night of the week had done its trick. It rarely had, the spots were usually still there; funny how a new one, bigger than all the rest, seemed to erupt on Saturday afternoons. Then came the after-shave lotion, Cusson's Imperial Leather or Corvette. In an advertisement for Corvette they claimed that although it wouldn't give you a new face it would make you worth a second look, so an extra splash or two of that. Finally, there was the talcum powder, handfuls of my sister's Yardley's April Violets tossed under the arms; Odor-O-No, the original pink deodorant liquid that came in little bottles, had yet to make an appearance, but at least we tried - or at least, I did!

All this preparation was a waste of time really because we never went straight to the dance. Instead, we headed for the Fleur-de-Lys pub for an under-age pint or two of Brutton's Home Brewed beer and a singsong. It would be getting on for ten o'clock before we arrived at the hall to hand in our gabardine macs and white silk scarves at the cloakroom. By then the band would be in full swing, either the Commodore Orchestra or Jock Lawson and his Clansmen.

It was always with the very formal '*May I have the pleasure?*' approach that a boy asked a girl to dance. All credit to them, the girls rarely refused. But then, we knew we were irresistible, what with the Corvette after-shave lotion and Brutton's Homed Brewed ale. I even got to dance with the pretty girl from South Petherton, the one with the very dark hair. Wonderful! And then she spoilt everything by telling me my suit was shiny, the one I bought in Fifty Shilling Tailors in Middle Street, Yeovil for £5, the first suit I'd ever had.

Then there was the '*excuse me*' dances, when came the dreaded tap on the shoulder from another fella. '*Excuse me,*' he'd mumble, and take off with the girl you been waiting all night to dance with. It was potentially a dangerous situation but rarely was there any trouble. It was just one of the rules of the game that we all more or less accepted, even if rather begrudgingly at times.

The '*Paul Jones*' was another hit or miss affair too. An inner circle of girls pranced around in a clockwise direction, an outer circle of lads slouched around in an anti-clockwise direction. Whoever was opposite you when the music stopped was your partner for the next dance. Funny, but you rarely got the girl you wanted, she always managed to either slow down or go a bit faster and so avoid you.

From time to time, there would be dances in other villages, particularly at carnival time. Carnival dances had that little bit of extra excitement about them. There was one carnival dance that I particularly remember - well, not the dance so much, more what happened afterwards when Tom Pearce's grey mare bolted.

The grey mare had been a carnival entry. It was a large wooden structure mounted on a trailer and it had been towed through South Petherton in the carnival procession with Harry Hall, Jan Stewer, Peter Gurney, old Uncle Tom Cobley and all that drunken lot perched on top. After the carnival, the trailer had been parked in the Crown Hotel yard, in the upper corner of the Square.

It was after the dance, when most people had gone off home to bed and the little town was falling quiet for the night, that the trouble occurred. Rather mysteriously, the trailer rolled out of the yard and careered down across the Square, gathering momentum as it went, until it crashed into the buildings opposite. It finally came to rest with the old grey mare wedged in the doorway of the Wheatsheaf Inn.

There were no witnesses except a small group of Merriott lads waiting for Harry Eason's taxi. When the local trouser-clipped copper arrived breathlessly on the scene, they helped him all they could with his enquiries, blaming some Martock lads who had just hopped it. I doubt if he believed them. Rightly so. But in case the Somerset and Avon Constabulary might now consider re-opening their inquiries, let me say here and now that I saw nothing and know nothing. I was at the time the incident occurred otherwise engaged, walking home the pretty girl, the one with the very dark hair.

About this time, our dancing horizons began to broaden even further, thanks to the Mid-Somerset Wanderers Cricket Club. The club was based at Langport and their involvement in the local dancing scene was connected with fund raising to finance their cricketing activities. They organised dances in villages and towns all over the area, with a different venue each week. Buses were laid on to pick up the dancers and return them home afterwards.

The dances followed the usual pattern, but the sometimes very long bus ride - all the way to Wincanton, for example - added a new dimension to our evening out because a major feature of the return journey was the singsong. How trendy we considered ourselves to be as we sang the latest songs like Guy Mitchell's '*She Wears Red Feathers*', or Johnny Ray's '*The Little White Cloud That Cried*'. Or perhaps we'd be in a more romantic mood and warble the *Homing Waltz*.

*A crowd stood around you the night that I found you,  
They all wanted you in the old homing waltz.  
Though you never knew me you smiled and came to me,  
And I made you mine in the old homing waltz.*

Sheer poetry, even now; and there's a couple more verses just like that. They just don't write lyrics like that any more.

Then there was that song Diana Decker used to sing:

*If I had a golden umbrella,  
With sunshine on the inside  
And a rainbow on the outside,  
If I had a golden umbrella  
What a wonderful world it would be!*

It wasn't a case of *if*, for didn't we all have golden umbrellas? They are, of course, standard issue for teenagers. I still have mine. Down all the years it's only occasionally leaked and we've rarely got wet - me and the pretty girl from South Petherton, the one with the very dark hair.

